

Barriers to Government Social Service Access for the Sama Dilaut in Southern Philippines

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ABSTRACT

As the Sama Dilaut are considered underserved and the most marginalized ethnic group in the Southern Philippines, this study investigates their perspectives and experiences of barriers that deprive them of access to government services. Using a qualitative case study design, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with key informants comprising 20 Sama Dilaut traditional leaders and elders (Botang Matto'a). Triangulation across interviews, focus group discussions, and documents was applied to enhance the validity of the findings. Results revealed five interrelated themes: lack of documentation, discrimination, intergenerational poverty, mobility and diaspora and limited access to education. These themes reinforce one another, implying that systemic issues hinder Sama Dilaut access to services, despite the passage of the Bangsamoro Organic Law, Bangsamoro Indigenous Peoples Act and the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act of 1997 (IPRA) that grants Indigenous Peoples' rights. The study highlights the need for a contextualized culture-based service delivery mechanism that incorporates cultural values into policy development for Sama Dilaut welfare. The findings contribute to the literature on Indigenous Peoples' governance, particularly in advancing Sustainable Development Goal 16.

Keywords: Sama Dilaut, culture-based service delivery mechanism, government service, inclusive governance, Southern Philippines

INTRODUCTION

The Philippine state is composed of diverse ethnic groups of different cultural background religions, and languages (Buendia et. al., 2006). Her existing law defined some of the inhabitants as Indigenous Peoples. Today, many of them face several problems. Some are voiceless and not well represented in the making of policies for their common good. They continue to bear the tyranny of misrepresentations from varied groups and individuals who are considered as outsiders by the Indigenous Peoples. Other than these, there is an outright denial of their value in nation-building (Ibera III, 2019). One of the indigenous ethno-linguistic groups is the Sama Dilaut (Sama Badjao/Bajau). They are known for exonyms such as Bajau, Badjao, Samals, Lutaos, Luwaan, Bajau Laut, Bajau Laud, Orang Laut, Pala'u, and Siyamals and are the most sea-oriented among the Sama-speaking peoples for they regard the sea as their haven and lifeblood which is the core of their existence.

They inhabit the seashores or maritime zone and live in cottages erected on stilts above the water that do not own any land (Bracamonte, 2005). Sama Dilaut are found in Sulu around the shores of Jolo, Siasi, Laminusa, and Tapul island, as well as further south in Sitangkai, Sibutu, Bongao, and the Tawi-Tawi islands. They are also found in smaller numbers distributed all over the Philippines particularly in many urban areas like NCR, Davao City, Iligan City, Bohol, Cotabato City, Batangas City, Lucena City, Cebu City, and as far as Baguio City in northern Philippines (Roxas-Lim, 2001; Bracamonte, 2005).

Existing literature provides important insights on the predicament of the Sama Dilaut. Roxas-Lim (2017) and Kusuma et. al., (2017) stated that the Sama Dilaut do not have permanent land ownership or no customary territory or land-based ancestral domains. They appeared to be barred from public spaces (Aoyama, 2016). Moreno (2023) indicated that the Sama Bajau lack recognition, leading to their statelessness, marginalization,

with having limited access to basic services, and perpetuating socioeconomic inequities. These researches underscored the negative state of the Sama Dilaut in Philippine society clearly inferred the lacked of comprehensive frameworks for addressing Sama Dilaut's issues and concerns.

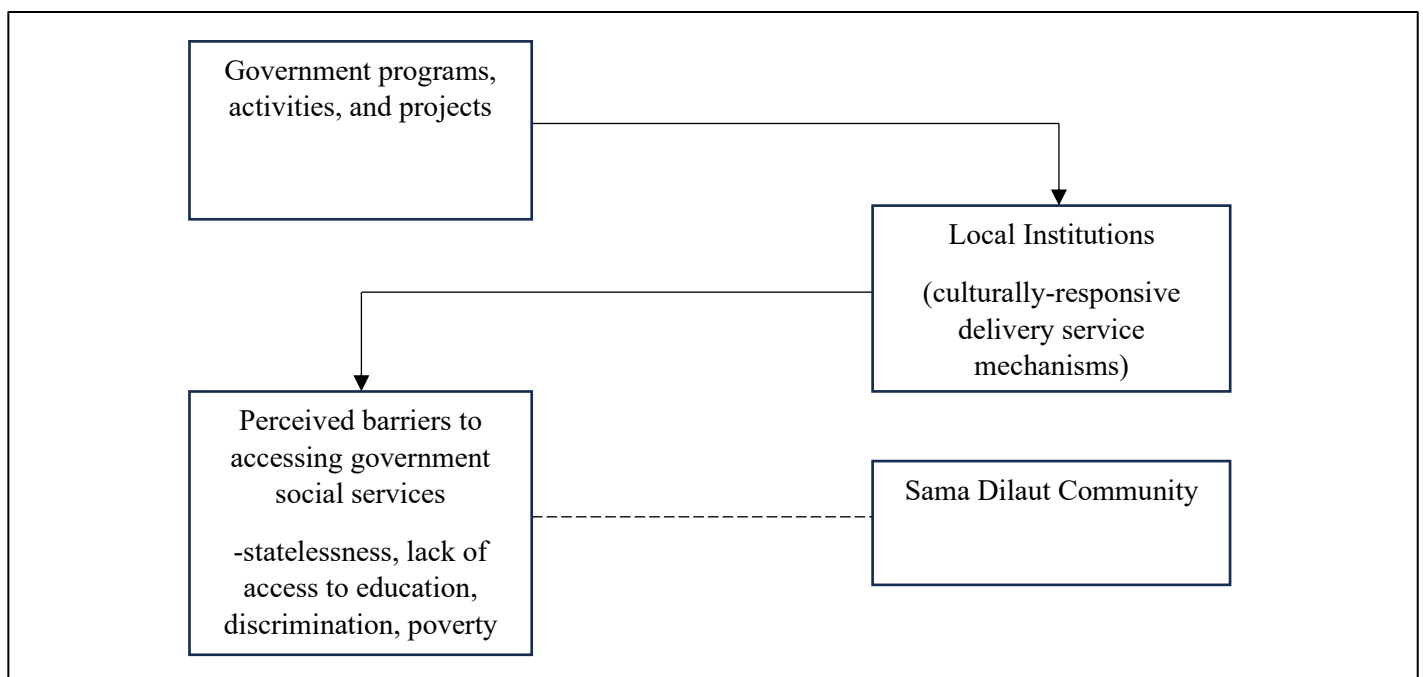
Against this backdrop, the Sama Dilaut presents an intriguing socio-cultural, economic, and political environment that merits examination amidst the institution of SDGs 2030 specifically SDG16 which highlighted the importance of inclusive governance aimed that no one is left behind (Annahar et al., 2023). For more than two decades since the adoption of the Local Government Code of 1991 and Indigenous Peoples Rights Act of 1997, Indigenous Peoples has remained marginalized and underrepresented. Some have not made a strong case for the recognition and protection of their rights despite the institutions of legal systems that serve as legislative foundations for effective innovation in resolving present and future challenges in Indigenous Peoples institutionalization.

Despite being subject to the bureaucratic processes and mechanisms of local government units under its authority, Sama Dilaut continues to face complex issues preventing them from fully participating in governance. Existing research demonstrates that incorporating constituents into procedures and processes improves program formulation and the livelihoods of marginalized Indigenous people (Benjamin and Bhuvaneswari, 2001). However, defining future policy development agenda customized to the Sama Dilaut necessitates the use of a contextualized culture-based mechanisms to development.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopted the Socially Inclusive Governance Framework introduced by the United Nations Public Administration Network (UNPAN) (Huffman, 2017) with modification that it employs a culturally sensitive government strategies that is cultural match (Smith, 2005) for providing accessibility for the Sama Dilaut to government socially provided services and within the cultural norms of the Sama Dilaut for the latter to fall within the ambit of governance in Southern Philippines. The primary assumption is that by incorporating informal traditional governance processes and mechanisms in service delivery will greatly improve Sama Dilaut engagement in socially instituted projects, activities and programs, which ultimately providing better access to services thereby promoting the welfare of the Sama Dilaut community. Overall, this theoretical framework facilitates a complete understanding of the Sama Dilaut's complexities which informs the analysis and recommendations in the research study.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK



The conceptual framework of the study explains how institutions enhanced government services by adopting culturally responsive delivery service mechanisms in promoting the welfare of the Sama Dilaut community. At the core of the framework are government programs, activities, and projects, alongside the perceived barriers that hinder the Sama Dilaut's access to services. When local governance employs culturally based policy implementation attuned to Sama Dilaut values, such implementation can serve as a pivotal force in breaking these barriers for vulnerable community members. This approach would encourage the Sama Dilaut to engage more favorably with socially established standards particularly at the local level to advance their interests and welfare.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A case study design was adopted to investigate the barriers to government social service access among the Sama Dilaut in southern Philippines. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions using semi-structured questionnaire in Sinama, one of the languages spoken in southern Philippines (Pallesen, 1985) among the 13th ethnic groups (Gowing, 1979) known as Bangsamoro either by ascription or self-ascription (Bangsamoro Organic Law, 2019). Purposive sampling was used to select 20 Sama Dilaut traditional leaders and elders (Botang Matto'a) in the island province of Tawi-Tawi, BARMM. A purposeful sampling strategy is useful to enable the selection of participants who could contribute information relevant to the research topics (Lugo, 2022). The aim was to gather rich, detailed accounts from participants with direct knowledge and experience of the issues based on predetermined criteria being a member of the Sama Dilaut community, 40 years of age and above (3) residing in the locality for 10 years, to achieve data saturation (Richards, 2009).

Document analysis supplemented the primary data, drawing on accessible literature and extant policies relevant to Sama Dilaut's condition as an ethnic minority in the Philippines was also employed. The data collected and information obtained from the study were documented, recorded, coded, transcribed and translated into English. All data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun & Clarke's (2006) approach of identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within the data. Triangulation across interviews, focus groups, and documents was applied to enhance validity and credibility of the findings. Themes were systematically organized around the key barriers affecting the Sama Dilaut's access to government services.

Ethical considerations were observed throughout. A letter addressed to the local officials and personal invitation to the participants was observed. Informed consent was obtained from all Sama Dilaut elders' participants, and confidentiality was maintained in accordance with research ethics standards. The researcher presented and explained to the participants the purposes of the study before the conduct of an in-depth personal interview and focus group discussions on the perceived barriers in accessing government services among the Sama Dilaut. Interviews were conducted face-to-face at times and locations convenient for participants, lasting approximately 30-45 minutes depending on the flow of conversation. Finally, the researcher engaged in reflexivity to acknowledge how personal positionality and bias may have shaped data collection and interpretation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the key thematic findings derived from the perspectives and lived experiences of the Sama Dilaut communities. These findings are contextualized within broader socio-political conditions that continue to shape Sama Dilaut engagement with national, regional and local institutions with regard to accessing government services.

Lack of Documentation

The Sama Dilaut are sea-based Indigenous Peoples, with the majority residing in southern Philippines. Historically, they dominated the coastal areas of the Sulu archipelago. When conflict erupted in Mindanao in the 1970s, many migrated to urban areas, resulting in their diaspora. The Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) 2020 Census reported that there are about 47, 802 Sama Dilaut living in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao. Because of their constant travel, their population can only be estimated if they are included in the census. In Tawi-Tawi, an island province in the southern Philippines under the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, Sama Dilaut communities thrive in isolated areas where access to government

service is limited. An example is the procurement of a certificate of live birth. Sama Dilaut must travel to municipal centers to avail themselves of the service. This challenge is compounded by illiteracy, leaving many unsure where to go and how to apply and register. Others have dismissed the service as burdensome, particularly since they are required to pay for registration. Participants emphasized:

“Aheka Bangsa Sama Dilaut itu maglahat ma katilingkal Pilipin lamud na saga ni Sabah ma Malaysia. Ya timpu pagbonoh na, waktu aktibis, bangsa kami itu pulak kanat na. Dakaw na sambung ma jawab maytu bang i-angay kaheka anna mbal ta rijister bangsa Sama pasal kami itu maglahi-lahi ni saddi saddi paglahat, meyah na pag-usaha-an kami lamud na maytu kulang pag iskul, pangadjih kami mbal tahati Sama banan ay na pain parkala ma parinta. Ameyah na kahekaan Sama alawak na maglahat” (Many Sama Dilaut live in the Philippines, including Sabah in Malaysia. At the height of the war in Mindanao, the community scattered across different areas. One reason many of us were not documented was our constant movement from place to place in search of livelihood. The lack of formal education and practical knowledge also meant that we had limited understanding of how government systems operate. This is compounded by the fact that a large portion of the Sama Dilaut live in far-flung, remote areas)

Participants identified geographic remoteness and isolation as key factors hindering access to birth registration. Coupled with low levels of education, these factors exacerbate marginalization and contribute to lack of identity and recognition. This lack of recognition will lead them to becoming stateless (Moreno, 2023). As part of its mandate to determine the population, the government conducts regular censuses of its residents, which include individual documentation. Each municipality in the province has its own municipal registry office that provides registration and other services to residents. However, for personal and cultural reasons, some Sama Dilaut do not avail themselves of these services. The participants stressed:

“Kahekaan bangsa kami halam aniyah sulat katarangan na ma pasal pag-anak” (The majority of the Sama Dilaut do not have a live birth certificate)

This suggests that the majority of the Sama Dilaut remain undocumented. For example, a study by Sabal and Baulete (2023, unpublished) found that the lack of documentation among the Sama Dilaut in Tawi-Tawi contributed to their vulnerability to statelessness. Reports from the Desk Review on Population at Risk of Statelessness (2021) also indicate that the Sama Dilaut have experienced decades of non-registration of births, even for children born in their habitual residence in the Philippines. This predicament faced by the Sama Dilaut has significant policy implications for the rights of Indigenous Peoples granted under IPRA.

The BARMM government, in collaboration with other stakeholders, undertakes efforts to reach out to vulnerable sectors, specifically through digital registration. This approach looks promising. However, without on-the-ground initiatives such as mobile registration caravans in remote places to assist the Sama Dilaut in registering birth information, they risk becoming stateless. Moreover, without a birth certificate, Sama Dilaut individuals cannot access education, healthcare, and other legal entitlements, which results in institutional exclusion.

Discrimination

Sama Dilaut are arguably the most marginalized of the Philippines' indigenous peoples (Roxas-Lim, 2001) and on the margins of otherness (Chou, 2006). In southern Philippines, Sama Dilaut have never been absorbed into the Filipino community since other residents believe they do not practice the Islamic faith (Villa and Wiratni, 2023). Aoyama (2016) asserted that Sama Bajau appears to be excluded from public spaces. They were confronted with a disparaging and repetitious image that other dominant ethnic groups, with or without malice, projected on them as a poor ethnic minority who wandered the streets and practiced no religion. Roxas-Lim (2017) reported that the Taosug referred to them in a derogatory way as luwaan (spit or vomit), diminishing their social status in Sulu society. This persistent discrimination has prompted the Sama Dilaut to live in isolation. Their residence in geographically remote areas further limits their access to government service. Participants noted:

“Bangsa Sama Dilaut itu, mbal nipag-addatan. Areyo pangandah bangsa saddi ma bangsa kami. Hangkan ilu si Sama Dilaut palawak na. Jari parinta sab itu, mbal du amaruli, halam sowala kami ma ay-ay parkala ma

paglahat” (The Sama Dilaut experience social marginalization and are often looked down upon by dominant ethnic groups. As a result, many tend to self-isolate. The government’s limited engagement further compounds their exclusion, leaving them without a meaningful voice in society)

The Sama Dilaut are often regarded as second-class citizens and face unfair treatment and discrimination because of their social position. This marginalization creates barriers to their participation in government programs, leading many to avoid accessing public services. It can be clearly inferred that the Sama Dilaut remain socially excluded from Philippine political life.

Intergenerational Poverty

Since time immemorial, the Sama Dilaut have regarded marine spaces as their sanctuary. Their social world revolves around the sea, where they fish and gather marine resources for daily subsistence. Predominantly living in stilt houses, they face poverty, limited access to education, healthcare, and other basic services (Gonzalez, 2019 cited in Moreno, 2024). With limited capital and resources, they experience persistent poverty. Poverty deprives them of opportunities and advantages in life. Compounded by low levels of education and a lack of vocational skills has contributed to widespread unemployment within the community. The effects are multifold, including reduced or lost access to government services. Participants lamented:

“Sabab eh kamiskinan, kami itu ahunit pasekot ni parinta ma parkala anu ni kagunahan lamud na maitu saga mag kah sulat katarrangan, pag iskul ma kaanakan, mowa banan kaanakan magtambal. Heka ni guna ni parinta insah na ta isbat sabab dalam maniyah panugut bang pasal sin kagunahan” (Because of poverty, the Sama Dilaut face significant difficulty engaging with government services, such as obtaining birth certificates, education for children, and seeking medical care. We have many needs that require government support, but we cannot pursue them due to financial constraints)

Accessing government programs is a big significant challenge for the Sama Dilaut, particularly when financial costs are involved. To obtain services, they must raise funds they often do not have. This issue also applies to birth certificate registration. Participants noted that the civil registry charges reasonable fees which the law imposed. However, for Sama Dilaut, a day’s catch of fish sold at an affordable price is typically enough only for daily consumption intended to buy rice and cassava. When payment is required, it often means sacrificing that day’s earnings. Participants emphasized:

“Ahunit pag-usaha bateh naan. Mbal na makajari massi ma lo-ok bay tagnah pag passihan kami” (It is difficult to make a living, as we are prohibited from fishing in our traditional fishing grounds)

The statement confirmed that Sama Dilaut lamented the loss of their customary source of income or fishing grounds as a result of Marine Protected Areas (SBPP, 2017). Panaguiton (2011) suggested that an increased number of commercial and illegal fishing activities in the Sama Bajau traditional fishing grounds resulted in the decrease of latter’s fish catches. Such encroachment of commercial fisheries has a negative impact on the Sama Dilaut’s economic conditions. This prompted the Sama Dilaut, for example in Tawi-Tawi province's main town, where Sama Dilaut adolescents supplement their family income by working as stevedores, in a lumber yard, washing clothes, working in a coffee shop, and performing other manual labor (SBPP, 2017). This circular pattern reflects the gradual growth in their social development. As Usman and Baconguis (2016) argued, Sama Dilaut remain trapped in poverty.

Mobility

As sea-based indigenous peoples, the Sama Dilaut are continually relocated from one place to another. Their mobility follows the rhythms of nature, shaped by sea conditions, weather patterns and other environmental factors. Aggravated by the historical and structural injustice, protracted conflict, societal and government attitudes that pay lip service to their plight (Kissa and Dawat, 2022), Sama Dilaut have become internally displaced and forced to relocate and live in impoverished slums in urban areas throughout the Philippines. Others have been forced to beg for a living in urban street communities, abandoning their original culture and customs (Draft Report of Brooklyn Law School, 2005). The push and pull factors worsened their diaspora as they continuously struggled for peaceful co-existence along with dominant groups. This persistent mobility has

prevented the Sama Dilaut from establishing permanent dwelling in their traditional habitat, thus further limiting their access to government services. Participants highlighted:

“Ya pag-usaha kami itu ni saddi saddi paglahat dikaw na sambung bang i-angay kami mbal maka lamud ma parkala parinta, bateh na pagbuwan buwas ilu, ayuda maka karansehean lagi pamuwan eh parinta. Mbal sadja si Sama Dilaut tabuwanan pasal ya paglahi lahi sigam ma pag lahat ilu” (Our search for livelihood across different locations explains why the Sama Dilaut are often excluded as beneficiaries of government programs. Because they continually relocate, they are rarely registered or reached by programs)

The continual search for fresh chances to support a family has driven the choice to relocate. Sometimes, the Sama Dilaut must follow government policies and programs, even if it means being relocated from their homeland (SBPP, 2017). For example, the Sama Dilaut in Tongkalang, Sanga-Sanga, Tawi-Tawi experienced an issue with relocation caused by local government decisions, resulting in the loss of their ancestral home (Datu Halun and Bagalanon, 2024). Uprooted from their traditional homes, they are forced to dwell in cities and other locations with no security of tenure making the Sama Dilaut vulnerable to discrimination, marginalization, and abuse (Talampas, 2017).

In the islands of Sitangkai Municipality, Tawi-Tawi province in southern Philippines, has been unpleasant for Sama Dilaut people due to the presence of other ethnic tribes who are also engaged in cultivating agar-agar (seaweeds). Because the Sama Dilaut used to dwell in Pondohan (houses in stilts in shallow waters), where they had a peaceful and dynamic community and were seaweeds farmers themselves. Sometimes, the Sama Dilaut family would prefer to avoid future problems and walk away if the situation proved untenable.

The BARMM government has passed the Bangsamoro Indigenous Peoples Act or BARMM Act No. 64, which grants Indigenous Peoples protection and rights over their ancestral domains. However, this law largely replicates the IPRA and focuses primarily on land-based domains. This focus appears inconsistent with the worldview of the Sama Dilaut, who reside in and depend on the sea. To align the law with the cultural beliefs of the Sama Dilaut, they should be granted rights to the ancestral sea domain.

Limited Access to Education

Generally, the Sama Dilaut lack formal education, which leaves many community members unaware of where to seek government support. Their limited exposure to Western-style education further acts as a barrier to accessing services. In Tawi-Tawi, Sama Dilaut children are occasionally absent from school or miss classes to help their parents earn a living. While education is critical for improving the Sama Dilaut's quality of life, several barriers prevent them from pursuing higher education. Financial constraints are one of the major factors influencing parents' decisions to send their children to school (SBPP, 2017). The participants lamented:

“Mbal maka soport Sama Dilaut ma anak sigam mag pa iskul. Na jari akulang panghati si Sama Dilaut ma parkala pagparinta. Kaheka'anna mbal maka ubus langkaw pangiskul” (the Sama Dilaut cannot afford to send their children to school, resulting in limited exposure to governance. Most members did not attain college level)

Mina & Reyes (2017) underlined that there are significant discrepancies in access to essential services within and between ethnic groups in the Philippines. Years of schooling and access to safe water had the highest disparity (both within and across groups). Within-group inequities are higher among Muslim ethnic groups, particularly indigenous populations like the Sama Dilaut. Acero (2020) claimed that the Sama Bajau's low literacy has an impact on their seafaring skills and living situations. Their limited ability to read and write letters and figures leads to their poor marine abilities and living conditions. The Ministry of Basic, Higher and Technical Education (MBHTE) mantra that “no Moro pupil is left behind” remains largely symbolic as long as Sama Dilaut children on the fringes continue to be excluded from education. It will take deliberate action from BARMM educators and policymakers to implement a contextualized approach to education that ensures equal access for the Sama Dilaut.

Analysis

The study revealed persistent structural and institutional barriers that impede the Sama Dilaut's access to government social services. These interrelated, interconnected and reinforced barriers reflect a fundamental mismatch between state service delivery models and the Sama Dilaut's way of life, resulting in their social and geographic marginalization without adequate regard for cultural sensitivity. As a sea-based semi-nomadic community, the Sama Dilaut requires culturally responsive governance. Moreover, the government should develop and adopt policies that reach out to the community by creating meaningful and accessible mechanisms for service delivery. Ultimately, the human development of the Sama Dilaut serves as a critical test of inclusive Indigenous Peoples governance in the Philippines. It presents a significant challenge for state institutions particularly in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao to establish platforms that meaningfully include marginalized and vulnerable populations.

LIMITATIONS

The sample size of participants in this study may not adequately represent the larger Sama Dilaut community. Therefore, future research should include other sectors of a Sama Dilaut population from outside the core territories of BARMM. Expanding the scope of the study would allow for a more comprehensive understanding of the Sama Dilaut's socioeconomic and political conditions.

CONCLUSION

The study investigates the barriers limiting the Sama Dilaut's access to government social services in Tawi-Tawi Province, BARMM. Data were gathered through qualitative interviews from 20 Sama Dilaut traditional leaders and elders and analyzed thematically. Findings revealed five interrelated themes: lack of documentation, discrimination, intergenerational poverty, mobility and limited access to education. Such themes perpetuate systemic issues that hinder Sama Dilaut access to services, despite the passage of the Bangsamoro Organic Law, Bangsamoro Indigenous Peoples Act and the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act of 1997 (IPRA). These top-down legal measures appear futile while many Sama Dilaut continue to experience persistent barriers. This study contributes to the development of bottom-up policies for governing Indigenous Peoples in similar situations, aimed at building peaceful, just, and inclusive societies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To promote the welfare of the Sama Dilaut, the government should expand their access to education, health services, and security. To reduce forced mobility and prevent further displacement, the Sama Dilaut should be provided with housing in coastal areas, economic opportunities, and other essential services, preferably through culturally sensitive service delivery mechanisms. Most importantly, the Sama Dilaut should be granted rights and protection over their ancestral domain and coastal areas where they can live peacefully.

Conflict of interest

I have no conflict of interest to disclose.

AI Disclosure

I declare that this manuscript was prepared without the assistance of artificial intelligence. Hence, the content of this paper is original.

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